



The U.S. Presidential Inauguration

An Exceptional Tradition



President Barack Obama rests his hand on President Lincoln's Inaugural Bible. Michelle Obama holds the Bible as he takes the Oath of Office on January 20, 2009. (AP Images/Elise Amendola)

Many U.S. governmental institutions and political traditions support continuity in the midst of change. The laws and traditions surrounding presidential inaugurations are among the best examples of continuity during political change. The U.S. presidential inauguration embodies a unique bipartisan tradition, and even the most heated partisan political debates are set aside to honor the peaceful transition of power.

The inauguration of a president brings together all three branches of government: executive, legislative and judicial. The chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court administers the Oath of Office at the U.S.

Capitol, where Congress meets. Both major political parties are involved in planning the event.

Many U.S. inauguration customs date to the 1789 inauguration of President George Washington; others have developed over time.

When the Constitution Doesn't Apply

The U.S. Constitution doesn't specify how to install a president — only that the person elected must take a the "Oath of Office" — and it even allows for a slight variation: "I do solemnly swear (*or affirm*) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability,

preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States."

The option to affirm was offered in case a person's religious beliefs prohibit swearing. Only one president, Franklin Pierce in 1853, has chosen to "affirm" his oath rather than "swear."

Beyond the oath, the original Constitution is silent. It does not state when the president-elect should assume office, where he takes the oath, who administers the oath, what happens if the words are misstated, what happens if the president's term ends before the president-elect takes the oath, whether words can be added to the oath, whether a speech is required and many

other potentially contentious points. Swearing on a Bible is not required, although most presidents have chosen to use one. John Quincy Adams, by contrast, swore on a law book.

The 20th Amendment to the Constitution stipulates when the inauguration takes place. Going into effect after the difficult Depression-era transition from Herbert Hoover to Franklin Roosevelt in 1932, it set the start of presidential terms as noon on January 20. Until then, a president elected in November did not take office until March 4, the date the Continental Congress had set for President Washington's inauguration in 1788.

Traditions Take Over

But the 20th Amendment did not address one important question: what to do if the inauguration date fell on a Sunday, the traditional day of rest when it was once illegal to conduct public and private business in many jurisdictions. James Monroe consulted the Supreme Court and simply took the oath a day later, Monday, March 5, 1821. In 1849, Zachary Taylor did the same. Rutherford Hayes took the oath twice — March 3 and 5, 1877. Woodrow Wilson, however, took the oath privately Sunday, March 4, and publicly Monday, March 5, 1917.

After the amendment set the specific date and time, however, the risks of having either no president or two presidents for even a day were suddenly clear. Dwight D. Eisenhower in 1957 and Ronald Reagan in 1985 took the oath privately Sunday, January 20, and

again in public ceremonies the next day. President Reagan's private oath was televised.

Because the date for President Barack Obama's second inauguration falls on Sunday, the first African-American U.S. president will take the oath of office in a public ceremony on the national holiday commemorating civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr., January 21, 2013. U.S. Chief Justice John Roberts will administer the official oath in a smaller ceremony at noon on Sunday, January 20.

Though not required, every president since George Washington has delivered an inaugural address.

Customizing Their Experience

Over time, the list of inaugural events, activities and customs has expanded, as have the number of people who attend the events. Unique facts, precedents or notable events are associated with nearly every inauguration. Here are a few:

- In 1837, outgoing President Andrew Jackson and President-elect Martin Van Buren rode together to the Capitol in the same

carriage. Most outgoing presidents and presidents-elect have continued this tradition of traveling together to the ceremony.

- In 1877, Rutherford B. Hayes began the tradition of the president-elect and outgoing president meeting first at the White House before traveling together to the Capitol.

- Franklin D. Roosevelt began a tradition of attending a morning church service on Inauguration Day in 1933.

- James Madison and his wife, Dolley, were the guests of honor at the first official inaugural ball, held at Long's Hotel in Washington in March 1809. Tickets were \$4.

- In 1953, the Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies began hosting a luncheon at the Capitol in honor of the new president. Food from the president's home state often is served.

- Jimmy Carter was the first president to walk the parade route from the U.S. Capitol to the White House, but security concerns have discouraged the practice since.

The first U.S. president, George Washington, is depicted during his inaugural address on April 30, 1789. (AP Images)

